

CHI SIGMA IOTA (CSI)

The University of Alabama Chapter



SPRING, 2025

NEWSLETTER

From the Desk of the President

It is with great joy and humility that I welcome you to this special edition of the Rho Chapter Newsletter. My name is Fatima Akmal Leghari, the president of Rho Chapter during the 2024–2025 academic year. I am a third-year doctoral student in the Counselor Education and Supervision (CES) program at The University of Alabama, and I am deeply honored to stand alongside each of you in advancing the mission of Chi Sigma Iota.

As clinicians, educators, students, and advocates, this year has been filled with challenges, transitions, and growth. Through it all, the resilience you've shown continues to inspire me. Together, we have upheld the values of leadership, service, and academic excellence that are the foundation of our profession.

We have engaged in rich professional development through our participation in national conferences as presenters and volunteers, including the American Counseling Association (ACA), the Southern Association for Counselor Education and Supervision (SACES), and the American Psychological Association (APA). I, along with my colleague Dhikrullah, were awarded \$500 research grant from the College of Education to support our research on international graduate students navigating spousal relationships in the U.S.

Perhaps most importantly, many of our members have continued to serve clients and students across a variety of school and community-based settings through their practicum and internship placements. These experiences reflect the heart of our work and our unwavering dedication to making a difference in the lives of those we serve.



Fatima Akmal Leghari

CSI President, 2024 -2025

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About the CSI, UA chapter

Chi Sigma Iota (CSI), an international honor society that promotes academic and professional excellence in the counseling field, is rooted in the core values of wellness, human dignity, and servant leadership. CSI unites students, professional counselors, and counselor educators who are dedicated to fostering a healthier society through their work.

Founded in 1985, CSI has initiated over 130,000 members and currently maintains an active membership of more than 13,000 individuals across nearly 300 chapters worldwide. Membership in CSI signifies a strong professional identity and a commitment to excellence in counseling, while also providing access to a diverse network of peers and leaders in the field.

CSI's mission centers on advancing scholarship, leadership, advocacy, research, and ongoing professional development. Members benefit from a wide range of resources, including access to the *Journal of Counselor Leadership & Advocacy*, continuing education programs, career development tools, and opportunities for national recognition and awards.

At the University of Alabama, the Rho Chapter offers a vibrant community where members engage in leadership development, networking, and community service. Signature events such as Lunch and Learns, conference presentations, and volunteer initiatives provide meaningful opportunities for involvement and professional growth. The chapter is committed to fostering inclusion across all counseling tracks—School Counseling, Clinical Mental Health, Rehabilitation Counseling, and Counselor Education & Supervision, PhD—particularly in response to the evolving landscape shaped by the accreditation bodies.

Membership in CSI is more than a recognition—it is a platform for growth, leadership, and meaningful contribution to the counseling profession.

Meet the CSI Leadership Team



Fatima Akmal Leghari
CSI President

Fatima Leghari is a third-year doctoral student in the Counselor Education Ph.D. program at the University of Alabama. Originally from Pakistan, she brings over 5 years of experience working with diverse populations in both Pakistan and the U.S. Her research interests include barriers in mental health, international student wellness, and exploring non-traditional support systems in substance use interventions.



Dhikrullah Mudathir
Secretary/Newsletter Editor

Dhikrullah Mudathir is a second-year doctoral student in Counselor Education PhD Program at the University of Alabama, with a strong background in mental health, counseling, research, and advocacy. His research interests focus on mental health disparities, mindfulness, and substance use. Passionate about scholarship and service, and remains committed to bridging research and practice to foster equity in education and mental health services.



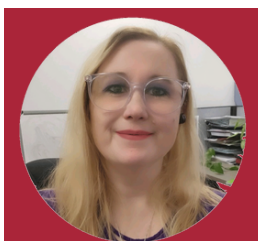
Khayree Files
PhD Representative

I am a Licensed Professional Counselor with 5 years of experience in diverse mental health settings, specializing in counseling children and adolescents. With a background in trauma-informed care utilizing play therapy techniques and person-centered, solutions-focused therapy, I provide a safe and supportive space for young people to heal and grow. I am a SACES Emerging Leader and have recently become an Adjunct Professor.



Caesar Abuga
School Counseling Rep.

Caesar M. Abuga is a graduate student in School Counseling at The University of Alabama, where he also serves as a Graduate Research Assistant at the Center for Substance Use Research. His work centers on mental health, wellness, and substance use recovery among underserved populations. Caesar has contributed to peer-reviewed publications and presented at national conferences.



Barbie Cederlof
Rehabilitation Counseling Rep.

I have worked for the state of Utah as a Vocational Rehabilitation counselor for four years. As someone with disabilities, I absolutely love supporting others and help them to be self-sufficient. I work to instill hope in them and get to watch them achieve their goals.



Dr. Junfei Lu
Chapter Faculty Adviser

Dr. Junfei Lu is an Associate Professor in the Counselor Education Program at The University of Alabama. He earned his Ph.D. in Rehabilitation Counselor Education, with a minor in Statistics, from the University of Iowa. Dr. Lu's research primarily focuses on mindfulness, the well-being of marginalized populations, and the social biases they face. Beyond his scholarly contributions, Dr. Lu has demonstrated significant leadership as the Chapter Faculty Advisor (CFA) for Chi Sigma Iota (CSI) since Fall 2024. In this capacity, he has provided guidance to the CSI leadership team, helped membership renewal and recruitment, supported annual induction ceremonies, and ensured the chapter's compliance with CSI's national reporting and activity requirements.

2024 SACES CONFERENCE

Dhikrullah Mudathir, a doctoral student in Counselor Education and Supervision, co-presented at the 2024 Southern Association for Counselor Education and Supervision (SACES) Conference alongside Dr. Junfei Lu, PhD, CRC. Their presentation, **“What’s New for Master’s Level Counselor Education: A Review of the CACREP Standard 2024,”** offered a timely and



research-informed exploration of the newly revised CACREP standards. Drawing on a collaborative study conducted with Sean Stumbo, MA, LPC, and Matthew Trieber, MA, CRC, the session highlighted implications for counselor preparation, accreditation practices, and curriculum innovation. The presentation led the discussion and share insights on curriculum development, teaching strategies, and professional practice. Educators, practitioners, and students in attendance had a glimpse of what to expect in the next eight years in counseling. Attendees learnt how these standards impact master’s level counselor education and the implications for curriculum development and professional practice.

In addition to presenting, Dhikrullah served as a conference volunteer, assisting with event logistics and participant engagement. This experience not only exemplified his dedication to professional service but also created valuable opportunities for networking and collaborative growth within the counselor education community. His active involvement reflects a strong commitment to leadership, scholarship, and service in the field.



Khayree Files
Emerging Leader

SACES 2024 –2025 Emerging leadership

I attended the Southern Association for Counselor Education and Supervision 2024 Conference in Dallas, TX, as a SACES Emerging Leader. As an emerging leader, I was part of a 12-person cohort with the opportunity to grow my leadership potential and seek mentorship from current counseling leaders.

My experience as an emerging leader was eye-opening, as I was introduced to various counseling professionals with varied leadership experience. I learned about the different ways I could be a leader and advocate in a field that fosters continued growth and the ability to change. At the SACES 2024 Conference, the emerging leader program required I volunteer at the conference, participate in cohort meetings, and meet the SACES Leadership at the time. This opportunity helped motivate me to be more intentional about how I practice being a servant leader and becoming more active in the counseling organizations I am a part of.



UA COLLEGE OF EDUCATION GRANT

The College of Education at the University of Alabama has awarded a \$500 research grant to support the project **“Navigating Spousal Relationships: A Study of International Graduate Students in Committed Relationships in the United States.”** The study is led by Principal Investigator Fatima Leghari, with Co-Principal Investigator Dhikrullah Mudathir, under the supervision of Dr. Granger, Principal Supervising Faculty.

This ongoing research explores the lived experiences of international graduate students in committed relationships, focusing on how academic stress, cultural differences, and overall quality of life influence marital satisfaction on the UA campus. The study employs a sequential mixed-methods design, beginning with an online questionnaire administered to 100 participants. The survey includes demographic questions and validated measures of stress, marital satisfaction, college adjustment, and quality of life.

Additionally, in-depth semi-structured interviews are currently underway with 25 participants to collect rich qualitative data about their graduate school experiences and spousal relationships as international students.

Findings from the study will be shared through campus workshops, national conference presentations, community engagement events at UA, and publications in reputable academic journals.

2025 CSI New Inductees, UA Chapter.

We celebrate the 2025 Chi Sigma Iota (CSI) New Inductees for the University of Alabama Chapter. Congratulations to all inductees—we're honored to have you join this distinguished community.

Cynthia McCusker

Rehabilitation Counseling program

Kearria Freed

Rehabilitation Counseling program

LaTara Turner

School Counseling program

Joe Lee Campbell

Rehabilitation Counseling program

Carmen Manauis

Clinical Mental Health Counseling program

Crystal R Cabell

Rehabilitation Counseling program

Amanda Lynette McGill

Counseling program

Jonesti S. Steele

Rehabilitation Counseling program

Kayla Elizabeth Dutson

Rehabilitation Counseling program

NEW FACULTIES IN THE COUNSELOR EDUCATION PROGRAM AT UA



Dr. Meredith Rausch

Associate Professor



Dr. Violet Hodge

Assistant Professor



Dr. April Upshaw

Clinical Assistant Professor



Dr. Matt McKenzie

Clinical Assistant Professor

2025 ACA Conference in Orlando: Volunteering Experience

Volunteering at the 2025 American Counseling Association (ACA) Conference & Expo in Orlando was an incredibly rewarding and enriching experience. The conference offered a dynamic array of sessions on topics such as mental health, trauma-informed care, diversity and inclusion, and the evolving role of artificial intelligence in counseling.

As a volunteer, I was assigned to various roles, including assisting with registration, directing attendees to session rooms, and supporting presenters during workshops. These responsibilities allowed me to interact with a diverse group of professionals and gain insights into the logistical aspects of organizing a large-scale conference. Volunteering at the 2025 ACA Conference was a transformative experience. I am grateful for the opportunity and look forward to staying actively involved with the ACA in the years to come.



Fatima Akmal Leghari

CSI President



3rd Position Leadership Essay Contest

Fatima Akmal Leghari
University of Alabama – Rho Chapter

Bridging Barriers: Advocacy, Equity, and the Future of Counseling in Medicare and Licensure Portability.

Professional counselors are uniquely positioned to advocate for equitable healthcare access through multicultural competencies and social justice advocacy. A strong professional identity empowers counselors to address systemic barriers, promote inclusivity, and advance health equity within Medicare enrollment and the Counseling Compact, ensuring mental health services meet diverse needs and improve access for all populations.

Social Justice Advocacy in Medicare Enrollment

Social justice advocacy in Medicare enrollment is pivotal for addressing health disparities among marginalized populations. Research highlights significant challenges in accessing mental

health services across various demographics (Benfer, 2015). Gender minority beneficiaries face unique healthcare utilization patterns, marked by increased psychotropic medication use alongside reduced outpatient and inpatient care, particularly among those qualifying due to disabilities (Progovac et al., 2019). Socioeconomic barriers compound these issues, as lower-income individuals encounter financial constraints and stigma that limit healthcare access (Allen et al., 2014). Racial disparities are stark; African Americans and other minorities underutilize mental health services even when adjusting for psychiatric disorder prevalence (Sheehan et al., 2024). Rural beneficiaries face additional challenges in accessing mental health care, despite having comparable illness rates to urban populations (Roll et al., 2013). Declining psychiatric participation in Medicare further exacerbates these issues, dropping to below 55% by 2009–2010 compared to 74% in 2005–2006, while other physician participation remained stable above 85% (Health Resource and Services Administration, 2015; Bishop et al., 2015). Social justice efforts aim to dismantle these systemic barriers and improve access for underserved communities.

Counselors play a vital role in advocating for policy reforms to expand Medicare's mental health coverage and implementing culturally tailored outreach programs to educate underserved populations (Rosenthal, 2016). This aligns with CACREP 2024 Standards, section 3 Foundational Counseling Curriculum under 2.A.4, which emphasizes advocating alongside individuals to address systemic and social barriers (CACREP, 2023). It also aligns with Chi Sigma Iota's mission to promote counseling excellence and servant leadership, prioritizing equity and well-being (Chi Sigma Iota Academy of Leaders, 1999).

Training counselors in multicultural and social justice advocacy ensures mental health services are accessible and effective. CACREP 2024 Standards, Section 3.B, require counseling programs to prepare students to address oppression, privilege, and systemic barriers like stigma and historical mistrust (Cooper et al., 2002).

Social Justice and the Counseling Compact

The Counseling Compact improves mental health service delivery across state lines, enhancing access for underserved and rural populations. By incorporating social justice frameworks into licensure portability, the Compact ensures equitable access to counseling services for ethnocultural minorities. CACREP Standard 3.A.5 advocates for counselors' roles in promoting equitable policies and multicultural competence, while Standard 3.B.9 emphasizes strategies to eliminate barriers, prejudices, and discrimination. The recognition of counselors as Medicare providers is a pivotal shift, enabling more effective service to diverse populations while upholding social justice principles (Moorhead et al., 2023; Sinclair et al., 2024). Collaborative care models foster health equity by addressing logistical and systemic gaps and ensuring culturally relevant interventions (Cabassa et al., 2014). The Compact also emphasizes cultural humility and self-reflection, echoing CACREP Standard 3.A.11, which underscores the need for ethical and culturally responsive practices while evaluating one's own strength and limitations.

The Role of Accreditation and Professional Organizations

Accreditation and professional organizations play a critical role in embedding social justice advocacy within counselor education and practice. CACREP-accredited programs (Section 3.A.3 and 3.B.10) focus on advocacy strategies to address systemic inequities, preparing graduates to lead initiatives that promote social justice in healthcare policies and service delivery.

CACREP accreditation ensures consistency in counselor training, which facilitates licensure portability under the Counseling Compact. This standardization helps expand the pool of culturally competent counselors, enabling them to address disparities in Medicare's mental health care delivery (Urofsky & Bobby, 2013). The CACREP standards influence Medicare enrollment requirements by establishing a framework for quality education and training that aligns with federal healthcare regulations. Over 600 programs have achieved CACREP accreditation since its inception in 1981, boosting the professionalization of counseling and increasing recognition among health plans, including Medicare (Urofsky, 2012). However, the lack of CACREP accreditation at many Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) may hinder access to Medicare enrollment for their graduates, highlighting disparities in counselor training and service provision (West & Moore, 2015). Therefore, integrating CACREP standards into counselor education elevates training quality and directly impacts counselors' ability to participate in Medicare, affecting mental health service delivery (Fullen et al., 2019; Morgan et al., 2022).

Professional organizations, such as CSI and the American Counseling Association (ACA), amplify these efforts by advocating for Medicare coverage expansions and offering resources to support counselors' social justice leadership. For instance, addressing shortcomings in current Medicare models, such as the inconsistent integration of mental health in Accountable Care Organizations (ACOs), requires counselors to engage in systemic advocacy (Hockenberry et al., 2023). CSI has upheld its mission for over 40 years to support counselors and clients in these interconnected efforts.

Integrating Social Justice into Technology and Professional Development

Technological innovations like telehealth present opportunities and challenges for social justice in mental health care. CACREP Standard 3.E.5 emphasizes technological literacy,

urging counselors to engage with digital tools while addressing disparities in internet access and digital literacy among underserved populations. Social justice frameworks guide advocacy for equitable technological infrastructure.

Ongoing professional development is vital for effective advocacy, requiring counselors to examine biases, expand cultural knowledge, and commit to lifelong learning. CACREP Standards 3.A.10 and 3.A.11 highlight the importance of reflection in addressing oppression and privilege, enabling counselors to tailor interventions to diverse clients and systemic inequities.

Call to Action: Social Justice Advocacy in Action

Social justice advocacy empowers counselors to dismantle healthcare barriers through strategic policy reforms and community engagement (Counseling Compact, n.d.). By promoting Medicare expansions and utilizing interstate practice privileges, counselors can address mental health disparities in marginalized and rural populations. Integrating social justice frameworks into professional education enables counselors to champion equitable healthcare, ensuring Medicare services reflect the diverse needs of all communities.